HI-FI RUSH:
MEGAMIX

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GA-100

Sugibee

PE-338
Butterfly-Sister

ERROR
Reminder
Next
Meeting
in the
Video
Call

Making Time by Psychangels

The roads are as empty as they usually are. Normally, Macaron would be happy about that. Right now, he finds himself wishing that they were at least a *little* more crowded.

Shoulders hunched up, he taps one of his fingers against the steering wheel. His gaze flits about. Brow furrowed, he shifts around in his seat.

By all accounts, he *shouldn't* be feeling this way. Things are going great! Roxanne is back in charge. He's head of R&D again. He's got friends! They've cleaned up a lot of the mess Kale and the previous heads left behind. And...he's changed. He's supposed to be more confident; sure of himself. Unafraid of what comes next. Especially of things he has no reason to be so scared of. And yet...

Macaron rolls to a stop at a crosswalk. A group of people start making their way across the street. Shoulders falling a little, he takes a deep breath.

They're just going to have tea with Roxanne. His friend. Who vanished off the face of the earth for about 5 years. And he hasn't gotten much of a chance to spend time with until today. And she's certainly changed in that time. Just like him. Except she was being mind controlled that whole time, so how exactly she's changed is...well. He's not sure.

Pedestrians safely on the other side, he gently presses on the gas. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Macaron tries to ignore the churning in his stomach.

It's fine. Everything will be just *fine*. Like CNMN said earlier, there's no reason to be so tense. It's just tea. It'll be *fine*! He needs to be confident! Think *confident*!

...Speaking of CNMN, he's in the passenger seat, gazing out the window quietly. He's not exactly none the wiser to Sir Macaron's plight. After all, as insinuated just a moment ago, they spent much of their time before they left the apartment discussing it. However, he has nothing else to really say on the matter. Any lingering anxieties Sir Macaron has he'll simply have to push through.

So, instead of worrying about it, he's sitting with his brewing excitement. At long last, he'll get to *properly* meet Madam Roxanne! Sure, they *met* before, but they didn't really get a chance to talk. And they haven't had that opportunity since then—until now.

For years, CNMN has only ever heard things about her. How kind and compassionate she is. How hard she's worked to help people. All the projects she's helped Sir Macaron with, and how he's returned the favor many a time. Of course, he's *seen* plenty of the good she's done, as well. Smiling faces, kindly bots, so on and so forth. They're on an island *built* upon all of it. Suffice to say, it's hard to ignore her altruism.

But *hearing* and *seeing* isn't enough. To *truly* know a person, you must *engage* with them. And now, he finally gets to do just that! CNMN simply can't wait to meet the *real* Madam Roxanne!

Meanwhile, said madam is at her apartment setting a glass of sugar cubes out, alongside some milk and cream. Macaron always liked to add a lot to his tea. She smiles. Such a sweet tooth!

She blinks a few times. The corners of her mouth fall, her brow furrowing.

...Wait a moment...*did* he?

Roxanne sighs. It seems as though everything's slipping away from her these days. Even things like this—things she *should* remember so well. And yet. Day after day, she's left like this: full of doubt. Her memories feel hazy. Her mind's been warped. Lost in a daze, foggy and uncertain. A rather...familiar feeling by now. Which is concerning, to say the last. Because if she's still like this, then...

...then...

Blinking, she looks around.

When did she walk into the kitchen...?

Taking a deep breath, she shuts her eyes and hugs herself, her head falling forward.

She's supposed to be *free*. It was shut down—they made sure of it. He's...gone. Her fingers curl into the fabric of her sleeves.

And *yet*.

One of her hands strays, moving to rest over the implant between her collar bones.

...Perhaps she should've expected it wouldn't be so simple. Hardly anything ever is. But she'd *hoped* things could go back to how they were before. Or, at least, close enough.

That's part of why she invited Macaron over. To return to that sense of normalcy. Roxanne smiles weakly. And, of course, she's missed her old friend. It's been *far* too long since they last sat down and talked. Plus, she's been wanting to get to know his new partner.

...This isn't the time to be fretting. They'll be here soon. She needs to finish getting things ready.

Shaking herself, Roxanne opens her eyes and lifts her head. Standing tall, she moves to get the snacks she'd prepared earlier, then takes them out to the living area.

She readjusts some of the treats. Before she can start readjusting and fiddling with anything else, there's a knocking at the door.

Dusting herself off, she takes a deep breath. And opens the door.

Macaron smiles down at her. Standing next to him is CNMN, who has a big, open-mouthed grin drawn onto his face. She finds herself smiling back at them.

"Hey, Roxanne. Hope we didn't keep you waiting *too* long," the former says.
"Hello, Madam Roxanne!" the latter greets her with a wave.

"Hello, Macaron. CNMN." She nods at each of them. "You didn't. I just finished getting everything set out, actually." She steps aside. "Please, come in and have a seat."

They both do so. Macaron takes the couch, leaving enough room for her. CNMN's in one of the armchairs, his head turning this way and that as he takes her apartment in. It looks pretty similar to theirs. Idly, he wonders if the rest of the layout is the same.

As Roxanne pours a cup of tea for Macaron and herself, she asks, "How have you been?"

"I'm...alright. Busy—you know how it is. But I'm doing better than I was for a while there," Macaron replies. "How about you?"

"Good. I'm glad to hear that." There's a brief pause as she hands him his cup. Then, "I've been better. It's taking me a bit to...readjust."

His brow furrows. He opens his mouth to ask if she'd like to talk about it, but she speaks again before he can.

"And you, CNMN?" She sits down next to Macaron, but her attention is on him. "My earlier question was for *you*, as well."

"Oh! Why, I'm doing quite well, thank you for asking!"
"Good. I see you've got some new legs. How're they working for you?"

"I'm still adjusting to them, but they've been operating smoothly. Sir Macaron has made quite remarkable progress on my repairs overall, despite his busy schedule!"

"Sounds about right. You've always been good at managing your time and resources," she says as she smiles up at Macaron.
He grins back. "Well, that's because I always had *you* around to make sure we had everything we needed."

"You really should give yourself more credit!" CNMN and her say at the same time.

They look at one another.

Roxanne chuckles. He draws a pair of red swirls onto his cheeks, and keeps the grin he'd drawn earlier.

Her eyes widen a little. "You did that so quickly, I barely even noticed the marker. How *do* you do that?"

"Well, you see..."

The afternoon really flew by. Roxanne had missed this sort of haziness; stories and laughter and good conversation with friends. And now, it's come to an end. She's grinning despite that.

As they say their farewells, she says, "Let's do this again sometime soon."

Macaron beams. CNMN draws two big, sparkling eyes around his actual ones.

"Absolutely!" the former exclaims.
"I can't wait!" the latter replies.

"Fantastic! Let me know whenever you're free."
"I should be telling *you* to do that."
"...Fair enough. But know that I can always find time for you."

There's a brief pause.

Scooping her up into a hug, Macaron nods. "I'll let you know as soon as I can."

With a soft sigh, she hugs him back.

Not long after, they depart. Their energy lingers in the air, keeping the smile on her face and worries from her mind for a little while longer.

Pleasant music plays through the elevator speakers, filling the silence. Not that it necessarily *needed* filling. CNMN finds that comfortable silences like this are rather enjoyable. A breather between the chaotic moments of life. And they offer time to reflect.

Doing just that on the events of the afternoon, he's left feeling content. As his fingers twitch, he notes excitement, as well. Both are unsurprising.

Madam Roxanne was almost exactly how he'd assumed she'd be. Polite. Graceful. Considerate. Though, he was a little shocked by just *how* considerate she is. He's not used to people remembering to include him. Of course, his friends all do, but others? Hardly ever. Yet, the whole time, she always made sure to find some way to bring him into the conversation. To ask him about himself. And each time, she'd lean in, gaze focused on him.

He almost instinctively draws a pair of red swirls on his cheeks. Which is what makes him realize that he never erased the grin he'd drawn on when they first arrived. Not even once.

Macaron starts the car with a smile still on his face. He can't get himself to *stop* smiling.

Backing up, he sighs. He's really glad that CNMN and Roxanne got along so well. Not that he thought they *wouldn't*. He'd always figured they'd be fast friends. But he can't really stop his anxiety from making him think the worst.

Which...now, as he's driving back home, he finds himself feeling silly for fretting so much. CNMN's told him not to. Alas, That's not how it works. But he also can't stop himself from feeling this way after spending all morning worrying so much over nothing. Especially when CNMN had tried so hard to calm him down.

Shaking his head, he shifts his thoughts to his schedule. Of course, he's working almost everyday. There's still lots to be done. But he, too, can always find time. Especially for an old friend.

NO SIGNAL
Hang In There
BANG
HIRAI
Eragonda

HI-FI CAFE
HIBIKI
響音

The Turn of a Screw by Crow

He had a screw loose. That wasn't a euphemism - he could feel a screw loose in his lower back. How he could *feel* it, he wasn't entirely sure, but it felt like a strange itch at the base of his spine. It was annoying, but manageable, and he had dealt with much worse than one measly little screw before. *Manageable* was the least of his concerns.

Kale let out a sigh. He didn't know why he agreed to this. He didn't know why he agreed to anything.

"Soooo," The Defect said stiffly. "Are you still arguing with Peppermint? Because you could at least ask Mac if she's still not speaking to you. I'm not a mechanic or an engineer or whatever."

"It's not rocket science," he scowled, not in the mood to talk and definitely not in the mood to talk to *him* of all people. "If you can't do something as simple as tighten one lousy screw, then it's a damn miracle you've made it this far in life!"

The Defect sighed, and Kale could practically hear him rolling his eyes. "Uh, yeah man, it's a screw but I had to swipe the 'drivers off of Pep anyway. You shoulda asked her. She might kill me if I lose any of her tools and she's very scary when she's mad."

Kale snickered. His sister was barely intimidating, much less scary. Like a dog that had lost its bite. "If you must know, we're not on speaking terms."

"Soooooo you're avoiding her?"

He wasn't. If anything, Peppermint was avoiding *him*. All he'd done was make a suggestion about Roxanne's proposed family dinners, that they go along with it to make her happy - an effective and efficient method to make sure it didn't cause any issues. If Roxanne thought they were getting along, she wouldn't be constantly nagging them about how they were *family* and *needed to treat each other with respect.*

Kale's eye twitched. "I am an adult. I don't *avoid* people, I snub them."

"Gross, dude."

"You still have yet to convince me that you're an adult."

“That means you’re having a child fix your very delicate robo-parts, my guy.” Did he do anything else but talk? “Done, by the way.”

The Defect was staring at him expectantly as he put his shirt back on, buttoning it up and smoothing it out to make sure there weren't any wrinkles.

“What?” He snapped. “Are you expecting a tip?”

“I saw these cute little cat stickers the other day,” he said slowly.

“And?” *Holy shit.*

“Peppermint likes cats-”

“I know she likes cats, you idiot!” He pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing deeply. “Why are you giving me advice?”

“Pep’s my best friend and I want her to be happy. She needs to figure out how she feels about you before she can do that, and for her to do that, you actually need to talk to her and she might feel better if you give her something as an apology.”

Huh, Kale thought to himself. *That’s actually kind of smart-*

“Also I *kindaaaa-*” his voice cracked “-feel a bit bad about making you explode.”

Of course.

Kale still bought the dumb stickers, practically throwing them at her.

Peppermint was taller than the last time they’d spoken. Properly spoken, before she decided she was too good to be a part of this family. Her hair was streaked with blue - it had been pink when she was a teenager - and she’d shaved a lot of it off. It was a very...immature look, and it suited her perfectly. She still looked at him with that same old scowl and narrowed eyes, waiting for him to explain himself while he waited for her to ask what he thought he was doing.

He decided the best course of action was to concede, just this once. “Your dumbass friend said I should talk to you about family dinner.”

“Since when do you talk to Chai?”

"I don't *talk* to him. He talks *at* me." That distinction was important to him. "But I still need to talk to you."

"I don't think we have anything to talk about." She breezed past him, slamming into his shoulder as she went.

Kale snatched her arm before she could leave. He had to do this now or else he'd never get another chance. "I don't understand what your problem is-"

"*My* problem?!"

"Yes!"

"My *problem*," she hissed, yanking her hand out of his grasp, "is that you don't even care enough to sit still for an hour and actually be nice to me. This is important, and you don't even try. You barely apologized to Mom, you're still a dick to everyone, and you think everything is beneath you. Mom and I are trying to make this work and you keep acting like this isn't worth it, like you're not a part of this family!"

Who the hell does she think she is?! "Bold words from the little girl who ran away because you choked under pressure! I stepped up and did the right thing! SPECTRA was...flawed, but I stayed! I was here! I did what I thought was good for the company and this family!"
"Yes!"

"My problem," she hissed, yanking her hand out of his grasp, "is that you don't even care enough to sit still for an hour and actually be nice to me. This is important, and you don't even try. You barely apologized to Mom, you're still a dick to everyone, and you think everything is beneath you. Mom and I are trying to make this work and you keep acting like this isn't worth it, like you're not a part of this family!"

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Peppermint scoffed, sneering at him. "You didn't help anyone! Just yourself! I was willing to put up with you for Mom's sake, but not for this half-assed bullshit! You don't actually want to do anything. You just want everything to be done for you while you reap the benefits. You're not even trying to get to know me like Mom wants. You're not even doing the bare minimum, you're just pretending to do it!"

"What's the point of wasting all that effort?"

"Typical."

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s always how you do things isn’t it? No effort, path of least resistance, sitting on your ass and wasting your time coming up with ways to avoid doing the hard thing. Would it have killed you to set aside one fucking hour?! One hour!” She screeched. "You expect me to put in work while you do fuck all, which is all you ever do! All your damn accomplishments are from work everyone else did for you! I bet you’ve never even tightened a screw!”

Kale’s eye twitched as he felt his joints ache, as if every single screw in his mechanical body had decided to protest at her words, feeling much too tight all at once. He wouldn’t say something inside him snapped. No, it was much quieter than that, like paper being crumpled into a ball. Not a violent breaking of tension but the slow leaking of air out of a tire with a hole. He was so damn tired, and that was probably the only reason he didn’t yell back at her instead hissing at her through gritted teeth.

“I haven’t. But that doesn’t mean you get to act like you’re better than me.”

A strange look crossed Peppermint’s face, like she was just seeing him for the first time. Her shoulders relaxed, and she took a step away from him.

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A strange look crossed Peppermint’s face, like she was just seeing him for the first time. Her shoulders relaxed, and she took a step away from him.

“I’m not better than you because I can tighten a damn screw.” She frowned at him, and Kale could see the exhaustion on her face, mirroring his. “I’m better than you because I’m not an asshole.”

He must have been really tired because instead of clicking his tongue at her and firing back with some retort, it got a weak chuckle out of him. “You’re still immature.”

“Better immature than an egotistical jerk.”

“Using our big words now? Fun.”

She shoved him, less angry this time, less forceful. She still wasn't smiling, but she wasn't yelling at him anymore.

"I'm not better than you because Mom taught me to build, but you're also not better than me because you stayed. We need to sort our shit out, and we can't do that for Mom unless we both try." Peppermint pinched the bridge of her nose, sighing. "So can you just...try? Please?"

"Only if you do." His sister raised an eyebrow at him. "Don't pull any of that passive aggressive shit with me."

"Oh, you mean like how you are all the time?"

Before Kale could respond, Peppermint picked up the stickers that had fallen from the floor some time during their arguing. She looked them over, then stuffed them into her jacket pocket.

"I'm keeping these," she said as she walked past him, not slamming against him this time. "Thanks, I guess."

Kale felt his screws turn just a touch. Not enough to feel loose, but no longer aching. Maybe this could work. Probably not - they'd probably be at each other's throats again before long, but this was easier.

VOBSICA

Galahad

Pull the Stars From the Sky by Tobu Ishi

It's not a long walk back to her apartment, but as Peppermint Vandelay trudges across campus, she feels eighty years old instead of eighteen. She's turned in the last of her paperwork, and her folded graduation gown and cap are tucked under her arm. She ought to hang them in the bathroom while she showers tonight, to steam out the wrinkles; but she just wants to go to bed.

God, she's so tired. Two years ago, speedrunning her bachelor's degree sounded like an exciting challenge. She'd be done with college by the age when most people started! Free to focus on what she actually loves doing!

And who knew? Maybe the self-imposed time limit would make her classwork more challenging... But, no. It's just been a double load of bullshit, burning out her interests one by one as she blew through each class at top speed. At first, Peppermint hardly had time to socialize. Then she got her feet under her, only to discover that when your classmates are all years older than you, nobody wants to hang out with the punky little homeschooled teenager.

(She thought for a while, when she joined that rock band, that things would be different. But then that all went to shit, too...)

A car pulls up alongside her and brakes to a stop, with a crunch of tires on gravel. Peppermint whips around, middle finger ready to deploy against any number of hooting frat boys; but it's a glossy black sports car, and she could probably guess who was behind the wheel, even if the driver hadn't rolled down the tinted window to frown out at her.

"Walking home? Really?" He *tsks*. "I still don't understand why you haven't just bought a car, Peppermint. God knows you could afford it."

Her stomach congeals at the sound of that familiar drawl. "What are you doing here, Kale?"

Her older brother smiles at her, too sweetly. "Picking you up. What does it look like?" She cocks an eyebrow at him. With an exasperated sigh, he explains further, "Mom insisted that I come along when she flew out this morning for your...special day. She's otherwise occupied for the evening, so I thought I'd act like a proper older brother and take you for a night out myself."

"Ha!" Peppermint barks a humorless laugh. "We haven't had a 'night out' in years, Kale. You can't just show up out of nowhere and—"

"I wouldn't *have* to show up out of nowhere if you read my texts," he interrupts, voice thick with irritation. "Or answered my calls. You haven't blocked me again, have you?"

Peppermint glares at him. "You know exactly why I blocked you last time," she says. "And if you *ever* rat me out to Mom like that again..."

"God forbid I worry about your safety," Kale scoffs, with a roll of his eyes. "Why shouldn't I take my little sister out to celebrate, the night before her college graduation? I can't imagine you have any other plans."

"Yeah, and we both know whose fault *that* is, don't we?" Peppermint snaps. "Piss off, Kale." She flashes him that middle finger—it seems a shame to waste it, when she had it all ready—and stomps away, her metal foot clanking heavily on the sidewalk with each step.

"Pepperpot, wait!" he calls after her. "...Please."

She stops in her tracks. She hates herself for it, but she can't help it. He hasn't called her that in *ages*. There was a time in Peppermint's life, years ago, when she would have done anything to get her older brother to spend an afternoon with her.

Reluctantly, Peppermint looks over her shoulder.

Kale is leaning out the window of his car, watching her with something like regret on his face. "I am *trying* to do something nice for you," he says, and it almost sounds like he means it. "Show a little appreciation, for once in your life?"

...Dammit. Guilt and frustration and stupid, *stupid* hope tangle together in the pit of her stomach. Maybe, just this once, it won't be awful.

Still suspecting that she's going to regret this, Peppermint turns on her heel and stalks back to the car.

"Where exactly are we going?" she demands, hands on her hips.

Kale smiles at her. "I thought we could start with dinner. You still like Thai food, don't you?"

It's her favorite; and she's so sick of college campus food. Peppermint sighs. "Fine," she growls, hauling the passenger door open, and climbs in.

He can't just take her to the local dive noodle joint. Of course he can't. Peppermint doesn't know what else she expected. Her brother has always insisted on *the very best*, by which he always means *the most expensive.*

So here they are, at some kind of upscale fusion restaurant, all glass and gold and opulent elegance, with abstract dragons winding up the pillar-lined walls in angular spirals. The menu doesn't have prices listed on it. It's *that* kind of restaurant.

Peppermint feels desperately underdressed. When the maitre d' seated them, he gave the most skeptical look imaginable to her ripped black shirt and fishnets; and Kale had to have a quiet word with him, before he escorted them to a table tucked discreetly away in the corner.

Wouldn't want to spoil the ambience, Peppermint supposes. *Ugh.* This was such a bad idea.

Miserable, she leans her cheek on her hand and picks at her beautifully-plated serving of pad kee mao. It's garnished with edible flowers and an artful twist of bamboo. She's had better noodles for a tenth of the price they're probably charging here.

"Don't you like it?" Kale asks, lowering his spoon to pin her with that cool green gaze. He's hardly spoken to her between bites of his panang curry, which hasn't helped her mood. "I could have it sent back to the chef—"

"No!" Peppermint exclaims, slamming down her chopsticks in alarm. The glassware on the table rattles. Two older ladies seated at a nearby table crane their necks to watch them uneasily.

Lowering her voice, she hisses, "Absolutely not. It's fine." She's seen the way her brother can drag a hapless server across the coals if something isn't to his taste, and she's not going to unleash that on anyone if she can help it. "I'm...not that hungry, that's all."

Kale frowns. "Shall I have someone box it up for you?" he suggests, glancing at his watch.

"Why? Are we in a hurry to get somewhere?" Suspicion ripples through Peppermint's stomach.

"Actually, yes," Kale says. "I managed to schedule you an appointment with my stylist at seven, and I'd hate to keep her waiting. She's—"

"Your stylist?" Peppermint sits up so suddenly that her chair almost tips over backward. "What do you mean, your stylist?! Why—"

Reaching across the table, Kale catches her wrist in a hard grip. "Keep your voice *down*," he hisses, glancing around them. "Only a complete idiot would expect perfect manners from you, but could you try not to be an embarrassment, Peppermint?"

Peppermint follows his gaze. People are staring at them from all over the restaurant; quiet whispers mingle with the tasteful piped-in music. Ears burning, she hunches down in her chair like a scolded child.

A waiter appears graciously at Kale's elbow. "Is everything all right, sir?"

"Perfectly," Kale says, releasing his hold. "I apologize for the disturbance. It won't happen again." He glares at Peppermint, who hunkers down further in her seat. "Box that up for us, would you?" he adds, with a flick of his fingers at her plate. "We'll be leaving shortly."

"Of course, sir," the waiter says, and whisks Peppermint's plate away without another word.

As soon as he's gone, Peppermint leans toward her brother, pitching her voice at a low, furious whisper. "Why do I have an appointment with your stylist, Kale?!"

Her brother gives the clothes she's wearing a disdainful look, as if the answer ought to be obvious. "You're going to need something decent to wear tomorrow, aren't you? It's too late to have anything made to order, but I'm sure we can find you something respectable off the rack—"

"I already have an outfit picked out," Peppermint says, through gritted teeth.

Kale makes a dismissive gesture. "I'm sure you do," he says, indulgently, as if she were still twelve years old. "How many holes does it have ripped in it?"

Under the table, Peppermint clenches her fists in her lap. "Five," she says, sourly. She loves that black minidress, with silver chains woven through the slashes in the back. When she tried it on last week, she felt sharp and powerful, grown-up and effortlessly cool.

She can imagine exactly how Kale will look at her in it. Like she's something tacky, and silly, and small.

Her brother closes his eyes and exhales, thin nostrils flaring. "Peppermint, you're eighteen years old now," he says. "You do realize that makes you an adult, don't you?"

"Yeah," she says, glaring at him. "I do. Do you?"

He's rubbing his temples now, as if he's got a headache coming on. "I know you've always preferred to...make your own choices, but as a member of the Vandelay family, you're going to have to change the way you present yourself after you graduate." He skewers her again with that disapproving gaze. "You can't keep dressing like...like some kind of wannabe punk rocker once you're a professional adult. What will our employees think?"

"Who cares what they think?" Peppermint exclaims, bewildered. "It's none of their business! I'm—"

"Peppermint," Kale interjects, and his voice is strangely, suffocatingly gentle. "You must be aware that Mom will want to start you at Vandelay as soon as possible. She's been looking forward to training you up as her successor, teaching you the ropes...finally showing you off to the world, after all these years..." He pauses, rubbing his chin. "Unless you were planning to go directly into a graduate program? Not that it's necessary, but if you wanted the degree for its own sake, you could try discussing it with her..."

Peppermint stares at him, gears falling into place in her head with heavy clunks. Does her mother really expect her to join the company right after her graduation? Without even a break, a gap year...anything?

After all these years of studying, she thought she was on the verge of flying free. No plans, no expectations. The future seemed like a glorious blank, for her to scrawl on however she wanted.

In Peppermint's imagination, a vast, indelible V slashes across that blank slate.

"No," she says, shoving her chair back and surging to her feet. She backs a step away from the table, and then another, shaking her head. "No, I...I can't. I'm not—"

"Did you have some other plans? Real, concrete plans?" Kale interrupts, harsh and skeptical. That hint of gentleness is gone now, burned dry by his contempt.

Peppermint opens her mouth—and hesitates, trying to scrape her formless desperation for freedom into a shape that will make sense to him. Something she can make a logical argument for...

Kale's mouth curls into a sneer. "No?" he says. "I didn't think so. After all these years of paying for your schooling...what else did you expect, Peppermint? She deserves a return on her investment, don't you think?"

A shiver runs down Peppermint's spine. "Did...did Mom put you up to this?" she says, numbly. *Something respectable to wear.* Something that would photograph well for the press, when Roxanne Vandelay reveals her brilliant, gifted daughter to the world...?

"Does it matter?" Kale says, with a shrug. "I have an image to maintain, too, Peppermint. We all do. Vandelay is a valuable brand, and I don't want it tarnished."

Something closes in the back of Peppermint's throat. "Is that all our family is to you?" she spits, disgusted. "A brand? Another...*asset* for you to leverage? God, how are you *like* this?" She's almost shouting, but she can't seem to stop; she can hardly breathe. She can't do this, can't walk calmly back into a lifelong cage, can't face the disappointment in her mother's eyes if she refuses...

A heavy hand presses down on her shoulder. Her brother has risen from his seat to loom over her, as usual.

"Calm *down*," Kale snaps, in that tone of his that tries for 'soothing' but stalls out at 'irritated'. "There's no need to make a public scene! Good god, Peppermint, be reasonable. There are people who would cut off their *own* leg for half the opportunities you've had dropped in your lap—"

In one awful moment, something inside Peppermint sparks, catches, and explodes.

"*Fuck you!*" she shrieks, whirling on him. Blindly, she snatches up the glass of water from her place setting and splashes it across the front of his perfect suit and tie. "You asshole! You think I *want* any of it? I just want *out*!"

Kale staggers back, dripping and shocked. Breathing hard, Peppermint looks around wildly. Dozens of shocked eyes stare back at her; all the patrons of this gilt-plated, overpriced dump that can't even serve a decent plate of noodles without dressing it up within an inch of its life.

She can feel the crushing weight of their contempt for her. Her piercings, and her ripped clothes, and her bright blue hair; her interests and her choices and her vague, silly dreams.

"You know what? Forget it." There's a high, strange buzzing in her head. "I'm done," Peppermint whispers, and turns on her heel and flees.

Nobody gets in her way. The waitstaff dodge back as she passes, stumbling out into the night; and the gleaming golden doors slam shut behind her.

Back at the table, Kale is blotting at his drenched suit with a handful of linen napkins. "Dammit," he mutters, peevishly. "I *liked* this jacket." The expensive silk is probably ruined. He supposes it serves him right for wearing it tonight, but it's still a crying shame.

"Sir?" The waiter has reappeared at his elbow, holding out a stylish black takeout container, stamped with the restaurant's logo. "Your noodles are ready..."

Kale coughs, and draws his dignity back around himself like a cloak. "Throw them away," he says, disdainfully tossing a credit card on the table. "I doubt we'll be needing them after all."

The sprawling green lawn at the center of campus is all decked out for commencement, with a giant white tent surrounded by bright banners in school colors snapping in the early-summer breeze. The rows of folding chairs under the canopy are packed with excited families and well-wishers.

"Ginger Thompson." A bright-eyed girl steps up onto the stage, and the crowd whoops and applauds.

At the back of the tent, in the very last row, a pair of robots stand guard behind two particular chairs. It's a shame to cause a distraction on such an important day, but Roxanne Vandelay really can't travel anywhere without her personal assistants, these days. There are so many demands on her time; but she wouldn't miss her daughter's graduation for the world.

Thanks to their latest upgrades, her PA-D0 units can double as a security detail, which is admittedly convenient. Still, Roxanne does have...reservations...about some of the modifications that Zanzo fellow has been developing for their legacy models. Thank goodness for Macaron's steady hand on the reins...

"Wellington Tuttle." Another round of applause, as the stout young man accepts his diploma.

Roxanne frowns, only half paying attention. She glances sideways at Kale, sitting stiffly next to her with a bouquet of roses wrapped in gold tissue in his lap.

She's aware that her son thinks the world of his pet genius, but she can't help questioning his judgment. She was inspecting Zanzo's schematics for the new Armstrong interfaces just yesterday, and the user security risks are...baffling, at best. She'll have to have a word with Kale about it soon, before he promises the man any promotions that Roxanne wouldn't be comfortable honoring.

"Graham Underwood."

In their mortarboards and robes, the waiting students all look the same; but it bothers Roxanne that she can't pick her daughter out of the lineup. It isn't right that she can't recognize her own child at a distance. She really hasn't been spending enough time with Peppermint, these past few years. It's been difficult to strike the right balance, especially with Project Armstrong taking up so much of her time. Perhaps it's been too much of a distraction?

Roxanne knows that a certain degree of teenage rebellion is to be expected, and she doesn't want to pressure Peppermint any harder than she already has, but her daughter's behavior is starting to worry her...

"Alfredo Valente."

Well. Perhaps this milestone is a golden opportunity for them to spend some time reconnecting. They can close the book on this chapter of their lives, and start a new one together.

It's a pleasant thought, and it brings a smile to Roxanne's face. She has dearly missed her bright little girl ever since she went off to college.

"Peppermint Vandelay."

Eagerly, Roxanne sits forward, scanning the stage for a glimpse of her daughter. Behind her, she hears her PA-D0 units readying their built-in cameras with a whirr and a click.

There's a long silence, broken only by an awkward cough from someone in the crowd.

"...Peppermint Vandelay...?" The presenter looks around, uncertainly.

The stage is empty.

A murmur of confusion starts to build. People are standing up in their seats; the students still in line are talking all at once. Roxanne surges to her feet, peering over the heads of the crowd. Where *is* she?

"Peppermint?" she cries, a note of worry rising in her voice. "*Peppermint!*"

Unnoticed amid the commotion, Kale Vandelay averts his face from his mother's distracted gaze...and allows himself a small, triumphant smile.

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Persy <3

Mapelle

REN CHURRO

MANDELAY

MEOW
?!

VS
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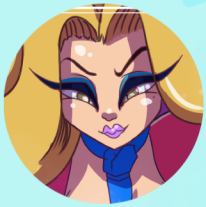

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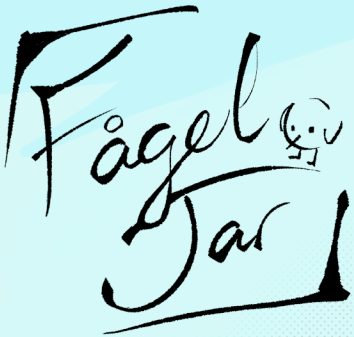

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